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NOTES ON THE PREHISTORIC CEMETERY OF LOUGHCREW, WITH FASCICULUS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE SEPULCHRAL CAIRNS.

By GEORGE COFFEY.

(Plates III. to VIII.)

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II.

NOTES ON THE PREHISTORIC CEMETERY OF LOUGHCREW, WITH A FASCICULUS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE SEPULCHRAL CAIRNS. By GEORGE COFFEY.

(Plates III. to VIII.)

[Read November 11, 1895.]

The Loughcrew Hills are situated about two miles east of the town of Oldcastle at the western end of the county of Meath. From the Oldcastle end the range extends some three miles in an easterly direction. Three main summits break the sky line, known, respectively, as Carnbawn, Sliabh-na-Caillighe, and Patrickstown Hill. They attain the heights, in the order mentioned, of 842 feet, 904 feet, and 885 feet above the sea level. The average level of the surrounding plain is about 300 feet above the sea level. The name Sliabh-na-Caillighe, properly attached to the highest of the hills, is frequently applied to the whole range.

The native rocks consist of Silurian grits: from these have been obtained the large slabs used in the construction of the passages and chambers of the sepulchral cairns which constitute the prehistoric cemetery of Loughcrew.

These remarkable monuments, the most important of which are grouped on the three principal summits of the range, were first described by the late Mr. E. A. Conwell, in a Paper read before the Royal Irish Academy, May 23, 1864.*

In the following year, Conwell succeeded in interesting the owner of the Loughcrew estate, Mr. Naper, and his agent, Mr. Hamilton, in the investigation of the cemetery, and, in association with Mr. G. V. Du Noyer, the systematic exploration of the cairns was undertaken.

* Proceedings, R.I.A., vol. ix., pp. 42–50.

The cairns had been unaccountably omitted in the Ordnance Survey Maps. The omission was at this time brought under the notice of the chief of the Survey, and during the progress of the excavations the cemetery was surveyed and mapped to the scale of 25·344 inches to a statute mile. This map is published under the title "Plan of the Sepulchral Cairns of Loughcrew in the County of Meath," and forms parts I. and II. of the six-inch Survey, sheets 9 and 15. It shows well the relative diameters of the cairns, but it does not show the forms of the chambers. The manner in which the boundary stones are curved inwards to mark the entrances to the larger cairns is not adequately shown; this feature being represented by a sort of flattening of the boundary circle at the entrance side. The funnel-shaped leading-in of the stones at that point is not shown.

On the 26th February, 1866, Conwell communicated to the Academy a detailed description of the cairns, and the results of the excavations of the previous year (*loc. cit.*, pp. 355–379). At the conclusion of the Paper, Du Noyer exhibited a series of drawings of the incised markings on the passage and chamber-stones, which form so remarkable a feature of the cemetery (*loc. cit.*, p. 379).

Subsequently, Conwell embodied the Paper read before the Academy in a memoir entitled "The Discovery of the Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla," published by M'Glashan and Gill, Dublin, 1873. In this final description of the cemetery, Conwell sought to identify the remains on the Loughcrew Hills with the ancient cemetery of Tailten.* Several conjectures of a

* Tailten is identified with the modern Teltown, about five miles north-west of the town of Navan, in the Co. Meath. No sepulchral monuments of importance exist at Teltown. Conwell tries to show that in ancient times Tailten included a district extending from the present Teltown to the Loughcrew Hills. He quotes the "Dindsenchus," from the "Book of Lecan," in which it is stated that Tailtiu caused the Wood of Cuain to be cut down for the assembly-place of Tailten. Also a passage from the "Annals of the Four Masters," concerning the last occasion on which the fair of Tailten was held, under Roderick O'Conor, A.D. 1198, in which it is stated that the horses and cavalry extended to the Mullach Aidi, now known as the Hill of Lloyd, about a mile and a-half west of Kells. This, he claims, reduces the distance between the fair ground of Tailten and the Loughcrew Hills, to about six or seven miles. In the "Rennes Dindsenchus," recently translated by Mr. Whitley Stokes, ("Revue Celtique," vol. xv.), we read, under Nás (20):

romantic character detract from the serious aspect of the book, but the descriptions of the monuments and of the results of the excavations are accurate as far as they go, though in regard to the latter more precise details are still to be desired.

Some difference appears to have arisen between Conwell and Du Noyer subsequent to 1866. In "The Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla" no mention is made of Du Noyer's assistance or of the drawings exhibited by him to the Academy. Illustrations are given of the incised stones in cairn T, conjectured by Conwell to be the tomb of Ollamh Fodhla, and of the most important stone in cairn L. These, he states, were drawn by Herr Wilhelm Tomsohn, who was in the printing-house of Foster and Co., Dublin, during the month of July, 1867, "under our own eye and correction." Tomsohn appears to have made drawings of the stones in the other cairns at this time,* but they have not been published; and I do not know if they are still in existence.

A series of drawings by Du Noyer was purchased in Dublin some years ago by Dr. W. Frazer, who has recently published them in the

"Eochaid, the Rough, son of Dua, King of Ireland, 'tis he that made a proclamation to the men of Erin to come and cut down the Wood of Cuan, with *laigin* (broad-bladed lances), and bill-hooks, and hatchets, in honour of his wife, Tailtiu, daughter of Magmor. So, in a month, they cut down this wood, and that plain is (now) Oenach Tailten."

South of the moat of Patrickstown, in the townland of Thomastown, Conwell states, there stood, until the year 1864, a group of twenty-one tumuli. These were being carted away at the time Conwell wrote (Proceedings, R. I. A., vol. ix., p. 47). A mile and a-half north of the Loughcrew Hills, near Virginia-road Railway Station, a slab is erected for cattle rubbing. It is incised with spirals of better work than those on the Loughcrew Hills. Conwell states that it is one of the chamber-stones of a tumulus which formerly stood on this site (*ibid.*, p. 48). Mr. Rotheram informs me that, on the north side of the railway line, near Virginia-road Station, where the Crosswater falls into the Blackwater, on a small but prominent hill, are the remains of a cairn of similar construction to those on the Loughcrew Hills. The boundary circle of stones is still nearly perfect. It is stated that a quantity of human bones were found in this cairn. On the south side of the line are portions of two other circles. It thus appears that there is some evidence that Tailten included a plain of some extent in ancient times, and, on the other hand, that numerous interments were made in the plain below the Loughcrew Hills. If the place-names in the poem on Tailten, quoted from the "Book of Lecan" by Conwell, could be identified, it might be possible to settle finally the question of the identification of the cemetery.

* "The Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla," *Preface*, p. ix.

Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (volume xxvii., 1892–93). The collection consists of seventy-six separate drawings of the incised stones, also plans of cairns H, I, S, T, U, and W. Some doubts have been expressed as to the authenticity of these drawings, on the ground that they are not signed by Du Noyer. But they are in Du Noyer's style, and are certainly not Tomsohn's drawings, as comparison with the illustrations in "The Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla" shows. I have, moreover, satisfied myself by comparing the memoranda and figures on these drawings with Du Noyer's writing and figures on signed drawings that they are his drawings. Apart from the great improbability that a third set of drawings was made, we have yet a further point of confirmation. One drawing is missing from Dr. Frazer's set, that of the principal incised stone in cairn L. A drawing of this stone was published by Du Noyer, in 1865, in the Journal of the Kilkenny Archæological Society.* It has been placed on the stone by Du Noyer himself, and is signed and dated (1865), on the lithograph. This drawing is in the same style as those in Dr. Frazer's possession, and it would appear that it was taken from the set for the purpose of this illustration, but not replaced. I have gone into the question of the identification of the drawings in some detail, as they form the most complete record now remaining to us of the incised markings. It is therefore important that their identification as the work of so skilled an antiquarian artist as Du Noyer, should be placed beyond dispute.

Referring to Tomsohn's drawings, Conwell remarks that it was fortunate that the drawings were made at a period when most of the devices on the stones "were clear and unmistakable after being recently exposed; for, at our latest visit to the place, we found instances from the effects of subsequent weathering, where it would be now impossible to draw the original devices with accuracy and fidelity."† As the weathering had probably gone much further since Conwell's time, I was impressed with the importance of verifying the accuracy of Du Noyer's drawings. The most convenient way of doing this, was to take photographs of the stones on which the incised markings were still fairly distinct. By comparing the photographs

* Jour. Kilk. and S.E. of Ireland Arch. Soc., vol. v., N.S., p. 379.

† "The Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla," p. 9.

with the drawings it would be possible to form an opinion as to the accuracy of the latter.

Accordingly, in May, 1892, in company with Mr. L. R. Strangways, I paid a preliminary visit to the Loughcrew Hills. On this occasion we made a general inspection of the cairns. In several instances we found that Conwell's words were now only too true. The weathering had proceeded so far in some of the cairns that it was not possible to identify the incised stones. In other cases, for instances, cairn U, the stones do not appear to have suffered appreciably since they were drawn by Du Noyer. Two of the chambered cairns L and T are still roofed over; in these cases the carvings in the chambers are quite sharp. During this visit Mr. Strangways took a few photographs, one of which is reproduced, Plate VI., fig. 1.

In the month of June following, a party was formed for systematic work, consisting of Professor A. C. Haddon, Mr. J. H. Pentland, Mr. E. C. Rotheram, and myself; Mr. Strangways unfortunately could not join us. Mr. Rotheram, who resides at Crossakiel, near the Loughcrew Hills, had been interested in the cairns for some time previously; his local knowledge of the ground proved an invaluable assistance.

Two long working days were spent on the hills. In the first instance, Conwell's measurements were checked, and found to be most accurate. The compass bearings of the chambers were likewise checked, and found to be accurate, and to have been in all cases corrected for declination. An extensive series of photographs was then taken. The floor of cairn S, which looked promising, was picked over, and a few finds made. In many of the cairns there is still abundant evidence of the practice of cremation noted by Conwell, in the numerous fragments of charred bones which may be picked out of the clay in the floors of the passages and chambers.

In the month of June of the next year, 1893, Mr. Rotheram kindly took a further series of photographs, several of which are included in the accompanying plates. Having obtained permission from Mr. J. L. Naper to make excavations in the cairns, he has since conducted diggings in a few of the cairns, where there was hope that Conwell's excavations had not been exhaustive. Mr. Rotheram has published the greater portion of his results in the Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of

Ireland, 5th ser., vol. v., p. 311. Some additional finds, not already published by Mr. Rotheram, are included in the following pages.

It is not within the purpose of the present Paper to describe the cairns in detail. The reader is referred to Conwell's Paper in the Proceedings of the Academy, and to "The Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla," for descriptive particulars.

The object of this Paper is confined to the publication of a selection of photographs of the incised stones, for the purpose of comparison with Du Noyer's drawings, and such details concerning the plans of the chambers and the finds as will supplement Conwell's descriptions.

Four examples of Du Noyer's drawings are reproduced for convenience of comparison, from blocks kindly lent by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. It is pleasant to be able to state that, with the exception of what appear to be unimportant details, Du Noyer's drawings are very accurate, and convey a correct impression of the character of the incised devices.

For the purpose of reference it will be convenient to retain the alphabetical designations of the cairns given by Conwell in his index map to the cemetery (Proceedings, R.I.A., vol. ix., pl. 11*a*).

The references by small letters to the incised stones are to Du Noyer's drawings and plans in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, vol. xxvii.

CARNBAWN.

Cairn D.

Plate III., fig. 1. General view of south side of cairn. This is the largest cairn in the cemetery. It measures 180 feet in diameter. An entrance was apparently indicated by the curving-in of the boundary stones at a point E. 20° S., but, on excavation, no trace of passage or chamber was found. The surface-level of the ground was reached for the greater part across the cairn, without disclosing any indications of an interment. Some animal bones were found midway down among the loose stones. In a Paper on Prehistoric Cenotaphs (Proceedings, R.I.A., vol. iv., 3rd ser., p. 16), I have advanced reasons for believing that this cairn is a cenotaph.

Cairn H.

Plate IV., fig. 5. The most important of Conwell's finds were made in this cairn. They included some 5000 flat pieces of bone, resembling somewhat in form the blade of a paper-knife; several of these were engraved with Late Celtic patterns, and one with a drawing of an antlered stag; portions of 13 bone-combs, also engraved with Late Celtic patterns; 7 small amber beads; 6 glass beads (one dumb-bell shaped); 18 bronze rings; and 9 articles of iron. It is worthy of note that all these objects were found in or near the entrance of the southern chamber. A large number of the bone objects are preserved in the Academy's collection, but the engraved bones are not forthcoming. Conwell states that they were placed in the hands of Dr. Graves, Bishop of Limerick, for the purpose of description. From inquiries made I have ascertained that they are no longer in Dr. Graves' possession. They were possibly returned to Conwell. Several examples are illustrated in "The Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla." I have not been able to trace them further. Drawings of five examples by Du Noyer are in the collection of his drawings in the library of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (vol. xi.).

Conwell picked over the contents of this cairn twice. Mr. Rotheram has since found in the chamber and among the *débris* thrown out of it: 3 glass beads and a fragment of another—one is dumb-bell shaped, of pale green glass, found in the south compartment; another is globular, of dark blue glass, with white stripes, found in the north compartment*; the other two are very small, of dark blue glass; two very small amber beads; a flat bone flake engraved with Late Celtic ornament,† and nine fragments similarly engraved; 3 fragments of bone combs, also ornamented; 4 bone points; a bronze spiral finger ring (fig. 1); 3 small open bronze rings, and fragments of 4 others; a sort of double open ring of bronze (fig. 2), made of a thin plate of metal, worked into the

FIG. 1.

FIG. 2. (Full size.)

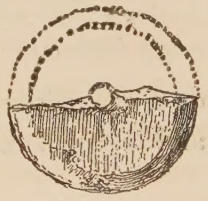


FIG. 3.

* Both figured in Journal R.S.A.I. 5th ser. vol. v., p. 315. † Figured, *ibid.*, vol. vi., p. 257.

form shown; 4 pieces of iron, ½ to 1½ inches long, two being pointed; half a whorl of a chalk-like substance (fig. 3); some pieces of red stone, showing rubbing, possibly used for paint; a crystal of calcite; pieces of micaceous schist, and many white and coloured pebbles. Conwell mentions that between two and three hundred sea-shells were found in this cairn. Mr. Rotheram has identified the following:—Cockle, periwinkle, pecten, limpet, and mussel.

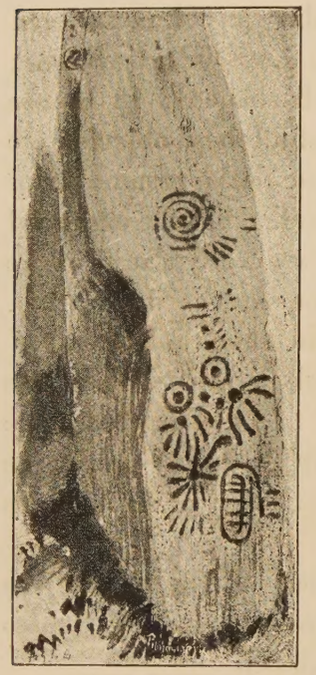


FIG. 4 (Du Noyer). Stone *c*, Cairn I.

No similar deposit of worked bones was found in any of the other cairns (two plain examples were found in cairn L, and Mr. Rotheram has found one example, possibly of the same class, in cairn U), and in none of the other cairns were objects of amber, glass, and iron found. Conwell states that "some curious attempts at dry masonry will be found at the northern and southern extremities of the chambers." The photograph, Plate IV., fig. 5, shows the northern chamber, and has been taken to show the coursed dry masonry at the back of the chamber. The construction at the right side of this chamber is probably recent. The nature of the "finds," and the occurrence of dry-walling, of a regular character, not found in any of the other cairns, seem to point to secondary interments, or a secondary use of this cairn, subsequent to the period of its erection and incised stones.

Cairn I.

Plate IV., fig. 4. View through passage of cairn, looking eastward: cairn T in the distance.

Plate V., fig. 6, stone *c* (see also figure 4, by Du Noyer).

Cairn L.

Plate III., fig. 2. General view of the cairn from the south. This photograph shows the curving-in of the boundary stones to the entrance at the east side.

Plate v., figs. 7 and 8. Stones *f* and *d*, left side of passage at entrance to chamber. Fig. 9, stone *m*, in chamber.

Plate vi., fig. 10. Stone at back of principal recess in chamber. This stone is figured by Du Noyer in the Journal of the Kilkenny Archæological Society, new ser., vol. v., p. 385. An excellent illustration of the stone is also given in "The Tomb of Ollamh Fodhla." The latter drawing appears to be based on Du Noyer's, but shows a somewhat larger surface of the stone, and some additional markings, especially the set of lozenges at the right-hand side. In a few details the forms of the markings are different in the two drawings mentioned.

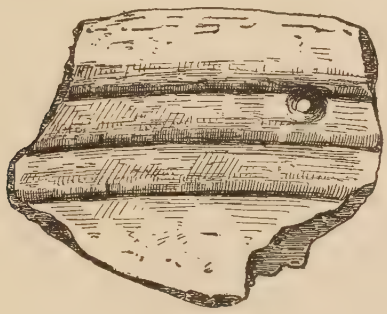


FIG. 5.

FIG. 6.

Conwell collected from among the loose stones which filled up this chamber "154 fragments of very rude pottery." "One piece," he states, "a portion of the upper edge of an urn, about three inches long and three broad, is very rudely ornamented with three slight ridges; and about an inch from the top is perforated by a single hole. Another larger piece ornamented with four slightly raised ridges is perforated by two holes, one an inch and a-half below the other." Drawings of these pieces are among Du Noyer's drawings, but have not been published. Dr. Frazer has kindly allowed me to make tracings of them for illustration here (fig. 5 is reproduced half scale; fig. 6, the larger fragment, one-quarter scale). These fragments do not appear to be portions of cinerary urns, but are rather of the character of domestic pottery.

SLIABH-NA-CAILLIGHE.

Cairn R 2.

Mr. Rotheram's finds from this cairn are published in the Journal, R.S.A.I., 5th ser., vol. v., p. 315. They included, in addition to some remarkable bone pins, four stone pendants, thirteen beads, stone and bone, and a very small but well-formed stone celt (one inch long). Subsequently, Mr. Rotheram found a small arrow-head of white flint among the *débris* of the cairn (fig. 7, full size).

FIG. 7.

FIG. 8.

Cairn S.

This cairn is shown at the left side of cairn T, Plate III., fig. 3. The plan of this cairn is restored by Du Noyer as Y-shaped.

Mr. Rotheram dug out the portion conjecturally restored by Du Noyer (the right arm of the Y) in August, 1892, but found no trace of the stones which would have formed the side chamber. He states that the digging was carried down to the "maiden earth," which seems to consist of bog overlying yellow clay, without result. A stone bounding the central chamber at this point, which should have formed the sill-stone of a side chamber, if such existed, was uncovered down to the yellow clay. The plan of the chambers of this cairn appears therefore to be irregular.

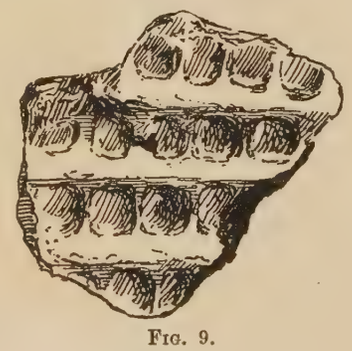


FIG. 9.

In picking over the floor of the chambers in this cairn, in June 1892, we found—a well-shaped stone pendant (fig. 8, full size); several fragments of an urn, or urns; the best preserved piece is shown (fig. 9, full-size); three small flakes of flint, showing evidence of fire; a short portion of what might have been a stout bone pin, with a longitudinal groove along one side—this object has been burnt almost to the consistency of porcelain; many pieces of burnt bones, and several human teeth, some strongly marked by fire, others showing no trace of fire. A

portion of a bone pin (fig. 10, full size) was subsequently found by Mr. Rotheram.

Conwell states that immmediately outside the passage of the cairn was found a leaf-shaped arrow-head of white flint, an inch and a-half long and nearly three-quarters of an inch broad.

FIG. 10.

Cairn T.

Plate III., fig. 3. View of cairn from the south-west.

Plate VI., fig. 11. The "Hag's chair." Fig. 12, stone *x*, left side of passage. (For Du Noyer's drawing of stone *x*, see fig. 11 below.)

Plate VII., fig. 13, stone *k*, right side of north recess. Fig. 14, stone *d*, left side of passage at entrance to chamber. Fig. 16, roofing stone *oo* of

FIG. 11 (Du Noyer). Stone *x*, Cairn T.

west recess. The reproduction of Du Noyer's drawing in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland does not show the S-shaped figure with circular mark above and two lines below it, at right side of

stone. I have examined the original drawing, and find that this figure is pencilled in on the drawing, which does not appear to have been finished. Fig. 15, stone *o*, at back of same recess. It was not possible,

FIG. 12 (Du Noyer). Stone *o*, Cairn T.

owing to the position of this stone, to throw a side light on it. The majority of the markings are, however, sufficiently distinct in the photograph to be made out with the assistance of Du Noyer's drawing (fig. 12).

Cairn U.

Plate VIII., fig. 17, stone *j* (see also fig. 13, by Du Noyer); fig. 18, stone *b*; fig. 19, stone *e*. Stone *e* is placed sideways on the plate; the bottom of the stone is at the left side. In the west chamber of this cairn Mr. Rotheram found portion of a worked flake of black flinty stone somewhat resembling the Bann type of flake; it was possibly an arrowhead

FIG. 13 (Du Noyer). Stone *j*, Cairn U.

or light spear-head, and in the northern chamber fragments of an urn. The floor of this chamber was covered with broken stones, and in the centre, in a hollow among the stones, the fragments of the urn were found. The fragments were in too crushed a state for illustration. The position of this urn shows that there never was a slab dividing this chamber into two compartments, as shown on the plan restored by Du Noyer.

PATRICKSTOWN HILL.

Cairn X.

The remains of this cairn consist of a stone circle 40 feet in diameter. Thirteen feet inwards from the circumference is an upright slab of stone incised with various devices. The incised surface faces N. 20° W. (Du Noyer's drawings, *loc. cit.*, fig. 76.)

Mr. Rotheram is of opinion that this stone is the back slab of what was originally a cruciform chamber. He informs me that some years before we visited the cemetery, he had this cairn dug out on that supposition, and found remains of cremation and a stone pendant,* also fragments of flint (fig. 14) and rude earthenware and one or two bone points.

A short distance from the remains of this cairn are portions of two other stone circles. The circle called by Conwell the "middle circle" is nine yards from that already described. In this circle Mr. Rotheram has found at different times three stone pendants, a stone bead, small fragments of an urn, burnt flint-flakes, the tines of stags' horns, and what he takes to be an earthenware whorl. The remains were cremated.

FIG. 14.

It is much to be regretted that the particulars of the finds in this important cemetery have been published in so fragmentary a manner. It is not too late to hope that a systematic re-digging of these cairns may yet be undertaken, and a report made on the finds as a whole, including Conwell's. The chief object of the present Paper, as already stated, has been the publication of photographs for the verification of Du Noyer's drawings. I have included the foregoing particulars of finds, made since Conwell's time, for the purpose of preserving a record of them for the use of future workers.

* Figured in Journ. R.S.A.I., 5th ser., vol. v., p. 315.

DESCRIPTION OF PLATES III. TO VIII.

PLATE III.

FIG.

1. Cairn D, general view of South side. Photographed by E. C. Rotheram.
2. Cairn L, general view from the South. Photographed by G. Coffey.
3. Cairn S and T. S from the South-west. T seen to the left. Photographed by G. Coffey.

PLATE IV.

4. Cairn I, view eastward through passage. Photographed by E. C. Rotheram.
5. Cairn H, the Northern Chamber. Photographed by E. C. Rotheram.

PLATE V.

6. Cairn I, stone *c*. Photographed by E. C. Rotheram.
7. Cairn L, stone *f*. Photographed by A. C. Haddon.
8. Cairn L, stone *d*. Photographed by A. C. Haddon.
9. Cairn L, stone *m* (magnesium light). Photographed by A. C. Haddon.

PLATE VI.

10. Cairn L, stone at back of large Recess (magnesium light), } Photographed by L. R. Strangways.
11. Cairn T (The Hag's Chair). Photographed by Rev. Dr. Healy.
12. Cairn T, stone *x*. Photographed by G. Coffey.

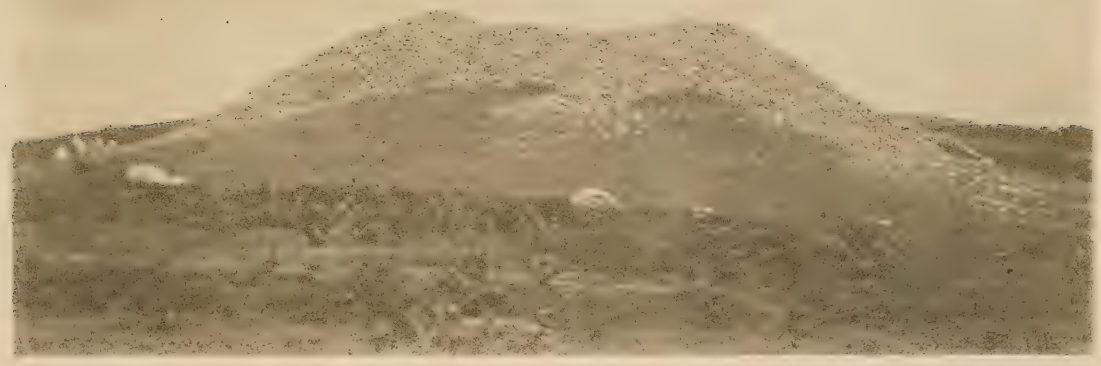
PLATE VII.

FIG.

13. Cairn T, stone *k* (magnesium light). Photographed by G. Coffey.
14. Cairn T, stone *d*. Photographed by G. Coffey.
15. Cairn T, stone *o*, at back of West recess. Photographed by A. C. Haddon.
16. Cairn T, stone *oo*, roofing stone of West recess. Photographed by G. Coffey.

PLATE VIII.

17. Cairn U, stone *j* (see also fig. 13, p. 35). Photographed by E. C. Rotheram.
18. Cairn U, stone *b*. Photographed by E. C. Rotheram.
19. Cairn U, stone *e*. This stone is placed sideways on Plate; the bottom of the stone is at the left side. Photographed by E. C. Rotheram.



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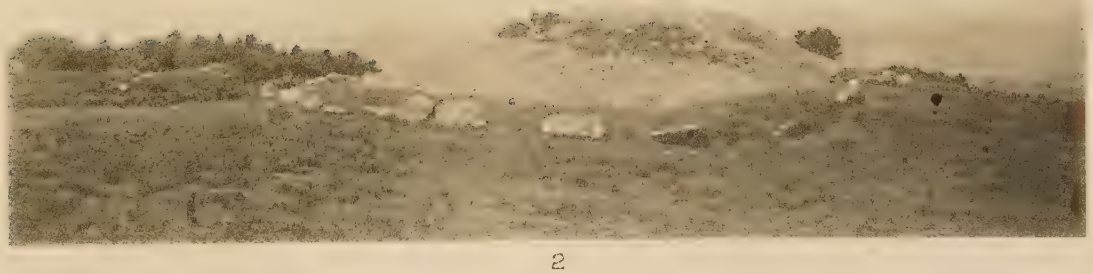

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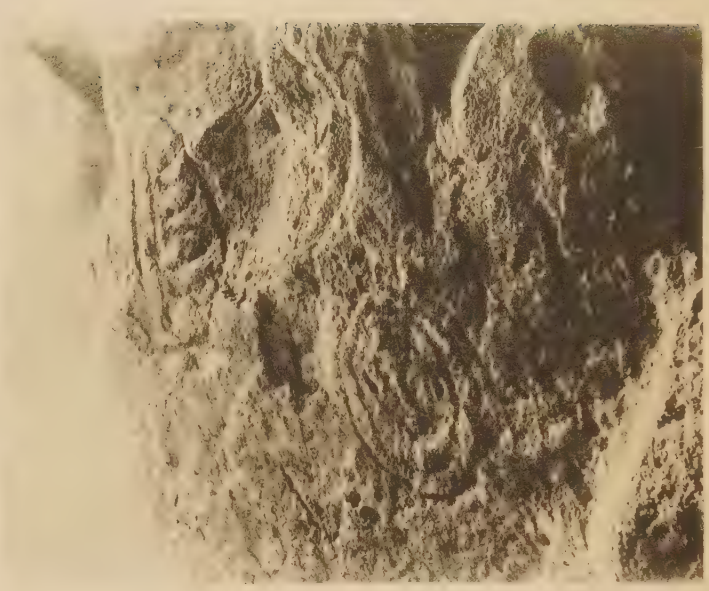

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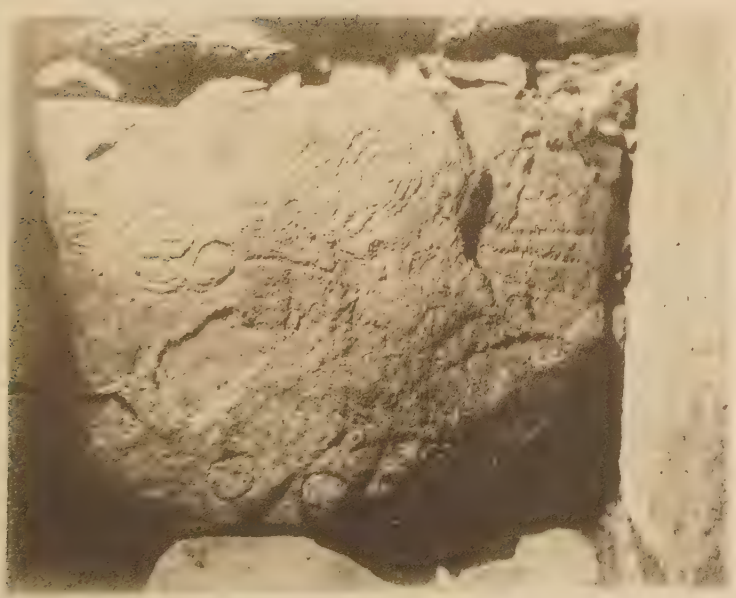

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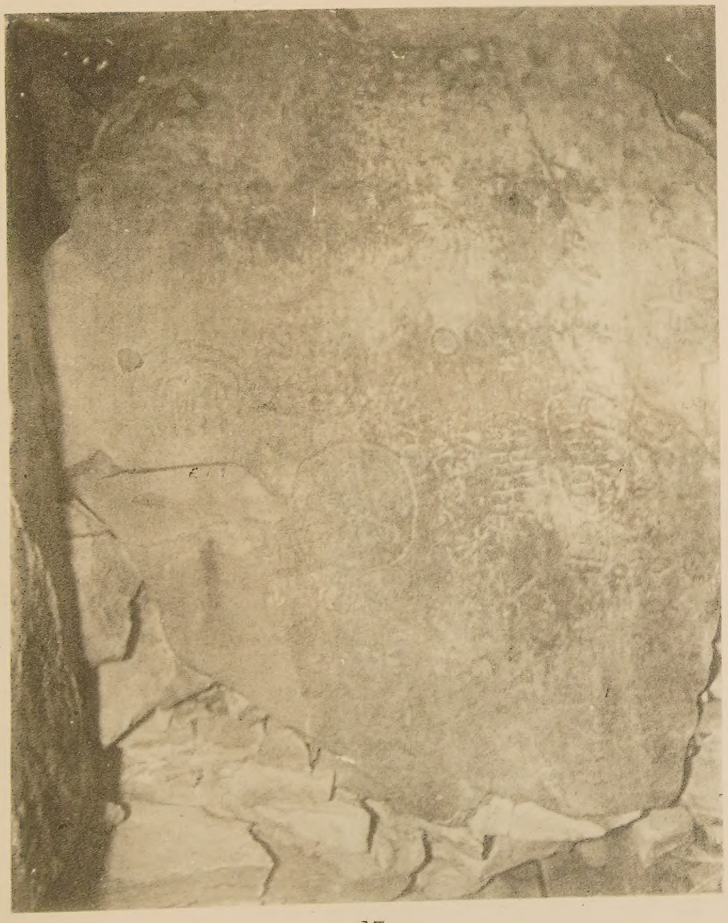

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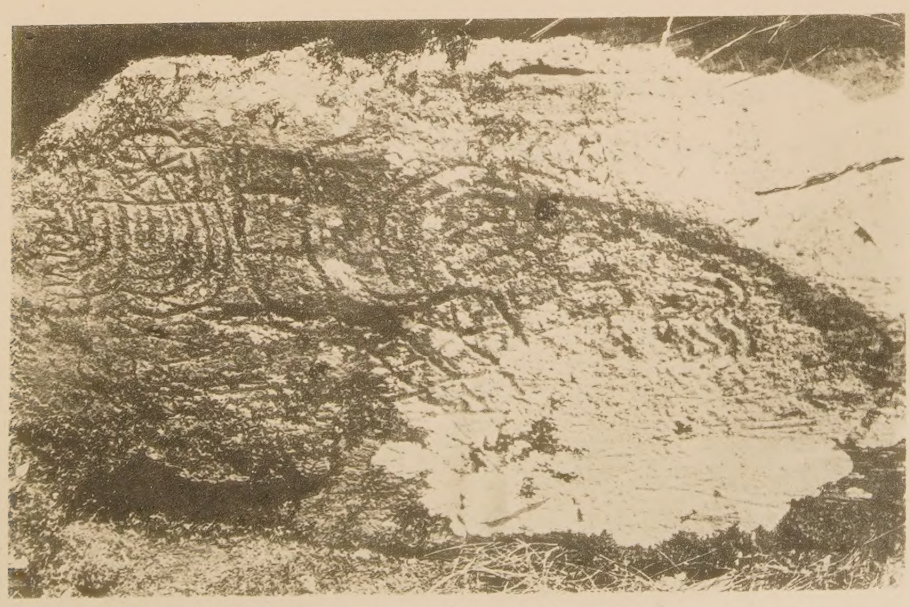

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